A Christmas pageant based on John’s gospel could be a real blessing to budget-conscious churches. There is no need for bathrobes or cardboard crowns. No manger stuffed with straw. No foil-covered shoeboxes representing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You do not even need actors. All you need is a single candle. The church would be bare and dark, the chancel stripped of all furniture and decorations. The only thing visible would be a small, insignificant table. On that humble table would sit a single, unlit candle.

The worshipers would file in and sit for a very long time, silent as a Quaker meeting. They would sit long enough to begin to feel uneasy at the silence, and maybe even a little anxious of the dark. At long last, someone would march solemnly down the aisle and, without a word, light that single candle. The darkness would be pierced, shoved back by the one thing that has power, ultimately, to push all darkness back: the light. And that would be that.

No one would, of course, ever seriously try to put on a Christmas pageant based on John’s gospel. Yet, having conducted this little thought mind experiment, you can see how different John’s Christmas story is! No color, or music, or pageantry: just one blazing, incontrovertible truth. A single statement so profound that maybe the only way to appreciate it is to sit in utter darkness and watch the candle-lit shadows play across the ceiling: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (v. 5).

How the light of a candle can push back the darkness is a remarkable sight, one we seldom witness in these days of electricity. But even the smallest, solitary flame can accomplish that, and no amount of darkness can make that candlelight retreat a single inch!

**The Word.** “In the beginning was the Word,” says John. Small comfort in that! Words are cheap and plentiful in this wired culture of ours. Fire up a search engine on your web browser, and in the twinkling of an eye, you can do a word search that ranges over unimaginably vast cyber-acreage. How many words must surge through that portal before its funnel clamps shut, leaving you with precisely the phrase you seek? What becomes of all the rejects, the unwanted words the search engine examined for the briefest instant before discarding them? Talk is cheap, as they say.

But that is not the way the Bible looks at words. In the Scriptures, words are living things. In Genesis 1, God speaks a word and creation comes into being. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of [God’s] mouth” (Psalm 33:6). God’s word is powerful and remarkably enduring: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

From our own life-experience, we know the power of words. To be sure, there are the swiftly forgotten words, the social pleasantries that help pass the time in a doctor’s waiting room. But then there are the fateful, life-changing words from the doctor’s lips, “I’m sorry, you have cancer.” Those words take on a different character. They endure as though blasted into a concrete milestone, marking for all time the dividing-line between life as it once was and life as it will never be again.

Commenting on the opening of John’s Gospel, theologian N.T. Wright points out how “the idea of the Word would also make some of his readers think of ideas that pagan philosophers had discussed. Some spoke of the ‘word’ as a kind of principle of rationality, lying deep within the whole cosmos and within all human beings. Get in touch with this principle, they said, and your life will find its true meaning. Well, maybe, John is saying this to them; but the Word is not an abstract principle, it is a person. And I am going to introduce you to him…that is the theme of this gospel: if you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus.”

**The Life.** “What has come into being” in Jesus, says John, “is life.” Not the sort of life the world values at Christmastime, the shallow exuberance of holiday cheer, the “life of the party.” The “life” of the secular Christmas party (in most years, anyway) is revelry and merriment, too much to eat and drink, and at the end of it all, a veritable mountain of trash to haul out to the curb. “Good times,” most would affirm, yet hardly the sort of experience one would sum up using the single, glowing word: “life.”

Years ago, entertainment mogul Ted Turner described this sort of empty existence most vividly, when he cynically remarked: “Life is like a B-movie. You don’t want to leave in the middle of it, but you don’t want to see it again.” The secular world seems, in its B-movie revelry, to be desperately grasping at anything that resembles life, but somehow never catching it. How else can you explain the “holiday blues” that afflict so many? Having failed to discover life inside the gaudiest package under the tree, the secular world hunkers down for many more weeks of winter, hardly daring to dream of spring.

But maybe, just maybe, this year of coronavirus is teaching us what it is like to dial down the holiday merriment, to value the single glowing candle in place of the bustling crowds. Here’s where John’s vision of life in the dead of winter, of a glowing candle piercing the darkness, is so powerful. You do not need a perfect Christmas or a perfect gift. All you need is an encounter with the One at the heart of the celebration and to know, as the carol says, that “light and life to all he brings, ris’n with healing in his wings.”

Today our congregation celebrates the first communion of this new year. We gather, virtually, at the table where Christ is the host. We partake of the tiniest portion of bread and wine whose taste is perfectly ordinary. It is hardly a meal to rival the groaning boards of so many Christmas feasts. But that is not the point, is it? Our purpose as Christ-followers is not to bask in the “life of the party.” It is to celebrate, in Christ, the party of life!

**Sources:**

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**The Party of Life**

Sunday, January 3, 2021 John 1:1-9, 10-18

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Epiphany is just a few days now (January 6th) and the “12 days of Christmas” will be over. Many people will dismantle their Christmas tree, take down the decorations, and store them until next Christmas. And we in the church will return, reluctantly, to what the Christian calendar bluntly, almost harshly calls “ordinary time.”

As the poet W.H. Auden writes:

There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,

Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem

From insignificance. The happy morning is over,

The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:

When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing

Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure

A silence that is neither for nor against her faith

That God’s Will will be done, that, in spite of her prayers,

God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.

But before we bid the season of Christmas farewell, we can reflect on a Christmas story we rarely examine. Matthew’s account of the magi, and Luke’s of the angels and shepherds, we know well. But the third Christmas story, the one told by John, is much less familiar.

**The Light.** You would have a hard time writing a children’s Christmas pageant based on John’s gospel. John tells of no expectant parents journeying to Bethlehem. There are neither shepherds nor angels. Nor are there wise men clambering over hill and dale, following a star. There is not even a baby lying in a manger. Instead, John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1).